

THE UMBRELLA OF LENT

by Father Frank Marangos

“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”
Luke 18:14

The “umbrella man,” the only person seen carrying and opening an umbrella on that sunny Dallas day in 1963 when President John F. Kennedy was struck and killed by a bullet, has been the object of much speculation. As JFK’s limousine approached the grandstand, Louie Steven Witt opened, lifted and spun a black umbrella high above his head. In the aftermath of the assassination, Witt sat down on the sidewalk next to another man before getting up and walking towards the Texas School Book Depository.

The concept of the “umbrella man” was first introduced by investigators Josiah Thompson and Richard Sprague who noticed the open umbrella in a series of photographs. Assassination researchers have speculated that Witt may have been acting as a signaler to other gunmen. Others have proposed that his umbrella may have been used to fire a dart with a paralyzing agent at Kennedy to immobilize his muscles and make him a “sitting duck” for an assassination. According to Witt himself, however, his umbrella was merely a visual political protest. Whatever the case, the mysterious bystander with the black umbrella in the Dallas crowd on the day of the JFK assassination remains an historical enigma.

The Holy Triodion, the liturgical book that encompasses a 72-day period of preparation for the Feast of our Lord’s Resurrection, is inaugurated by the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). The scriptural lesson was chosen to be read on the first of four Sundays of pre-lent because humility is the spiritual umbrella that keeps our eyes focused on ourselves rather than on the spiritual missteps of others.

The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee outlines two approaches to God. Unlike the black, protest-signaling umbrella of Louie Witt that also exemplifies the Pharisee’s critical eye of others, the humility of the Publican is introduced as the self-reflective parasol for appropriately approaching God.

The Pharisee’s umbrella includes four primary frame webbings – each of them equally detestable in God’s eyes: (1) pride, (2) self-righteousness, (3) judgement of others, and (4) religious formalism. The Pharisee was addressing his prayer to God, but was actually talking to himself. His main focus was on what he perceived to be his own greatness. The Pharisee had a legalistic mindset that incorrectly believed that he was saved by his good works. He looked down and judged others, actually thanking God that he was not like others. Finally, and perhaps most dangerously, he believed that God would reward him for his religious actions. The Pharisee believed that doing all the right religious things would bring him closer to God.

While the Pharisee, like Witt, focused attention on himself by lifting his religious umbrella high, the tax collector’s spiritual umbrella was pulled low over his eyes. Publican approached God with (1) reverence, (2) humility, and (3) repentance. Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector did not brag about what he has accomplished. To the contrary, he humbly presented himself before God, recognizing that because of his sin and spiritual rebellion, he was in need of mercy and forgiveness.

The ultimate use of an umbrella is to provide protection. Great Lent is our opportunity to humbly approach God under the protective parasol of prayer, humility, and love of others. God accepts those who recognize Him for Who He is – Lord and Savior. This is what the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee is all about – approaching God on the basis of Who He is – and not on the faulty assumption of religious activity.